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# Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: A Cultural and Ethical Evaluation

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**MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR:  
A CULTURAL AND ETHICAL EVALUATION**

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Captain Charles D. Wurster, USCG

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) with a focus on cross-cultural issues and the ethical use of "type" results. It draws upon a variety of pertinent literature, from the popular press to scholarly works.

Cross-cultural issues include: the universality of type, cross-cultural variations in type results, causes of those variations, and extrapolation of the results to cultural groups. Ethical topics include the potential for discrimination, the "subject's" viewpoint--including faking, ethical uses of the results, and employment-related issues.

The paper concludes that while the MBTI is a useful instrument it must be applied carefully and should never be used to segregate people "in" or "out"--especially in employment decisions.

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# Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: A Cultural and Ethical Evaluation

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**MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR:  
A CULTURAL AND ETHICAL EVALUATION**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is in widespread use throughout the world. As a "subject" of the indicator, I became interested in learning more about the "behind the scenes" details of this popular paper-and-pencil personality instrument.

This paper focuses on two areas of interest: cross-cultural applications and ethics. There is a short discussion of the methods used to validate the instrument. This serves as a lead-in to a variety of cross-cultural issues including: the universality of type, cross-cultural variations in type results, causes of those variations, and extrapolation of the results to cultural groups. A brief discussion of the basis of the Myers-Briggs theory and instrument serves as an introduction to the discussion of ethics. The ethical topics include the potential for discrimination, the "subject's" viewpoint--including faking, ethical uses of the results, and employment-related issues.

The paper concludes that while the MBTI is a popular, valid, repeatable, and useful instrument it must be used carefully and only with volunteer subjects who subsequently verify their own type. Most importantly, the MBTI type should never be used to

segregate people "in" or "out" especially in employment decisions.

#### BACKGROUND

"[The MBTI] describes the great variety of talents, and it emphasizes the ways in which some people are not just different from each other but opposite and complementary, i.e. their strengths are our weaknesses and vice versa. Its specific uses, primarily through counselling, include team-building, career planning, time management, communication and organization development." (Bayne 48)

MBTI--what is it? The MBTI is a personality evaluation instrument--sometimes incorrectly called a test--that reveals an individual's preferences for interacting with the world. The instrument is widely used and has been in use for more than 40 years. The MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) was developed by the daughter-mother team of Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine Briggs.

Myers and Briggs based their work on the personality theory of Carl Gustav Jung. Jung included three variables in his theory to explain the way people perceive, interpret, and respond to their environment.

The MBTI categorizes personality preferences with four variables. The variable added by Myers and Briggs identifies the preference for dealing with the outer world (Myers, Introduction to Type 6).



Each of the four variables is represented by one of two letters to indicate the preference. Hence, there are sixteen possible types. In professional journals and the popular press, the sixteen types are characterized as having certain general personality traits. Significantly, the traits are usually described with a positive bent. For example: "Warm-hearted, talkative, popular, conscientious, born cooperators, active committee members" (Myers, Introduction to Type 7). Most of the literature, particularly the popular press, adds areas of weakness for the various types. Within the general population, while all of the sixteen types are represented, the distribution is unequal.

Who's using the MBTI? Lots of people. It is very popular in business and government. The MBTI is often used to help individuals gain a greater understanding of themselves and to aid team building. The sale of the copyrighted instrument and related publications is restricted to trained administrators. None-the-less, there is reason for concern to insure the MBTI is administered correctly and the results are used properly.

Some studies show the distributions of MBTI types are different for various cultural groups. There are two obvious reasons the results might vary. The wording of the instrument may be interpreted differently by different cultural groups. Conversely, the results may reveal actual true differences in the subject populations.

If subjects are to obtain benefit from the results of the MBTI, they must have confidence that the instrument will give a true result for themselves. This is especially important since many people, myself included, resist the notion of anyone--let alone a relative stranger--"getting inside their head."

In addition, subjects must have confidence that the results of the MBTI will be used only in an ethical way. This is an extremely important issue.

Any time people are identified as a group rather than as individuals there is opportunity for discrimination. We may believe that in our everyday lives and, by extension, in the application of MBTI information, we can be unbiased. But a simple example may cause us to question even ourselves.

Imagine your choice to take up residence in one of two fictitious new countries. In country Alpha: The chefs are French, the engineers are German, and the police officers are British. In country Beta: The chefs are British, the engineers are French, and the police officers are German. Most people I know would pick country Alpha. Now, admittedly, this choice is based upon seemingly innocuous ethnic stereotypes. But the principal is demonstrated. We must be on guard to avoid falling into the ethical trap of judging people on anything but their own merit.

## VALIDATION OF THE MBTI

"[The MBTI] has been translated into 25 languages and is used in 30 countries." (Deane)

The MBTI was originally written in standard American English. To use it in other languages and cultures takes much more than a simple translation. There are at least three ways to develop a valid type indicating instrument in a new language.

1 - The first way is "from scratch".

This is the method that Isabel Briggs Myers used to develop the original instrument. This effort spanned many years and resulted in the refined American English version, form G, of the MBTI that is in widespread use today.

2 - A second way is to translate a valid instrument and validate it in the new language using a bilingual sample.

Albert F. Inclan describes the development of the Spanish version of the MBTI: He made an "informal linguistic translation" of the MBTI, Form G, and administered it to himself. He discovered that due to linguistic and cultural nuances the translation "did not measure the feelings and emotions intended by the authors of the instrument." Next, taking into account the cultural and social values of Spanish-speaking cultures, the instrument was formally translated selecting Spanish text which preserved the dichotomy of the original. Using input from three bi-lingual adults from

different Spanish-speaking cultures, Inclan refined the instrument to eliminate text that was culturally laden or ambiguous. Then the Spanish version was given to five bilingual people, again from different cultures, for back-translation into English. The instrument was further refined based upon those results. The finalized Spanish instrument was administered to a bilingual sample that had various residence times in the U.S. and various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each subject also completed the English version. The test-retest data, comparing the Spanish and English results, equaled or exceeded the results reported in the U.S. Inclan concluded: "... the translation is indeed a valid one which...would give fairly accurate results." (Inclan 35-46)

3 - A third way is to translate a valid instrument and validate it using a monolingual sample.

Eduardo Casas describes the development of the French version of the MBTI. Casas made a preliminary translation and refined it with two other translators. Their main concern was to retain the content validity of the original, "taking into account the underlying theory of types rather than carrying out a literal translation." Many word pairs were translated to "express psychological polarity and not necessarily logical opposition." The translation was refined using suggestions from thirty bilingual psychology students. An experimental version was tested on three student groups; test-retest reliability was

consistent with U.S. results. Then, the French instrument was given a preliminary validation in four studies that compared instrument results with the subjects' observed type in a work setting. Full scale validation was undertaken with francophone students in Ontario, Quebec, and France. Casas concludes that the results "are an acceptable evidence of the psychometric adequacy of this instrument for the purpose of continuing research and professional use." (Casas, Development of the French Version 3-15)

#### CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

"...it is clear we are in the early stages of the global evolution of type theory. It is proper to say that we are just starting to systematically address vital cross-cultural issues." (Twillman 34)

Is type universal? Are there cross-cultural variations in type results? What about co-cultures within the U.S.? What causes the cross-cultural variations that may be observed in the results of MBTI surveys? Can cross-cultural variations be extrapolated to groups as a whole?

There are differing views. Helen Pelikan, quoted by Barbara Deane, says that to answer these questions requires really good language translations and reliable cross-cultural data from the MBTI. "At this time we don't have enough." Pelikan has chaired a committee on cross-cultural issues.

"[R]esearch is needed to verify if the concept of type is understandable in non-western cultures...[and] to validate the MBTI with 'co-cultures' in the United States (e.g. with African Americans, Hispanics, etc.)" (Deane).

But Deane goes on to say "...type has been confirmed in every culture so far explored. It is not known how type preferences are expressed in each culture, and how core concepts are expressed in various languages and cultures." Deane also quotes Eduardo Casas as saying there are differences in type across countries that could be interpreted as psycho-cultural factors.

All of these questions are of interest as we recognize the human need to understand each other and the practical need to accommodate a more diverse work force.

### **Is type universal?**

It certainly seems reasonable to expect that type is universal. Although the MBTI Manual contains very little about cultural issues, it does explain that:

"Jung's theory is concerned with perception and judgement, which are information gathering and decision making, or taking in the stimulus and making the response. Because most behavior is concerned with perception or with judgement, type differences can be expected to occur across

a very broad range of life events. Jung believed he was describing mental processes common to the entire human species. To the extent that he was correct, type differences should be consistent across cultures." (Myers & McCaulley 223)

In a lecture delivered at the Eighth International Conference of the Association for Psychological Type in June of 1989, Eduardo Casas addressed the question from three perspectives: "the rational, the theoretical and the empirical."

- Type theories, along with mechanistic theories, have been with us throughout history. Conceptually, or rationally, type is "solid and pervasive."

- Jung's theory is universal by its very nature.

- Empirically the MBTI "works" in different languages and cultures. (Casas, Exploring the Universality of Type 241-242)

Researchers also conclude that type is universal. One group says their study "lends support to Jung's theory with regard to the universality of type...all 16 types were found." (Williams, et al. 9) Another concludes: It is possible to use type in cross-cultural research, cross-cultural results show similarities as

well as differences in the type tables, and more research is needed. (Casas, Exploring the Universality of Type 244)

More recently (fall 1992) Nancy Barger has written that the evidence so far "indicates that psychological type is universal", and "many suspect that the distribution of preferences may be different in different cultural groups" (The Impact of Culture on Type Development 18).

#### **Are there cross-cultural variations in type results?**

In a study of mainland Chinese college students, researchers found significantly more T and TJ than in the U.S. (Williams, et al. 9)

In the studies to validate the Spanish and French versions of the MBTI mentioned above, both observed differences from the U.S. data (Inclan) & (Casas, Development of the French Version).

In the development and validation of the Korean version of the MBTI, "...item analysis demonstrated that there may be differences in the social desirability and type distribution ratios across the two cultures. Tentative support exists for Jung's assumption that psychological type appears in all cultures but in different proportions" (Sim 2687-A).



Interestingly, similar types occupy similar jobs in various cultures. "The type tables we have at this point indicate that types self-select for occupations in other cultures much as they do in the U.S. As data come in, there is great similarity in the preferences of people in similar occupations in widely different cultures" (Barger, International News 21).

#### **What about co-cultures within the U.S.?**

(The term "co-culture" appears in some of the literature to describe a cultural group that exists in parallel with the predominant culture of the society at large. Typically, in this context, the co-culture is a numerical minority and has an ethnically distinct culture.)

There is little historical data on racial and cultural variation in type preferences within the U.S. This is partly because minorities may have been under-represented in the sample populations when the instrument was first validated and placed into popular use. Most studies involved middle class college students and business people. Also, at that time in our country's social development there were plenty of excuses to inflame racial differences. Practitioners may have seen no need to immerse the MBTI in the conflict. In other words--we really didn't want to know. The MBTI answer sheet does not collect racial or cultural data, so data on co-culture type distributions is necessarily the product of special research. The lack of

knowledge can be frustrating for those who seek to apply type theory and the MBTI to real world situations today.

"[O]ver the past ten years...there has been little published data as it relates to blacks." "[The] limited concentration on demographic data is based on CAPT's [Center for the Application of Psychological Type] assumption that the MBTI is culture neutral. As a result, one is led to believe that as MBTI relates to blacks and whites, it is race neutral" (Battle 161).

On the other hand there has been some exploration of types in U.S. co-cultures. An early (1972) study found that the type results of samples of Black college students showed a high representation of E, S, T, and J. The researchers speculated as to the source of these differences considering cultural, economic, and societal influences. They concluded there were statistically significant differences but recommended further research. They also concluded "the results of this study give considerable support for the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a psychometrically stable instrument capable of reflecting important group differences" (Levy & Murphy 652).

In a study of Hawaiians of Japanese and Caucasian ancestry, researchers found that the Japanese sample had significantly more I, J, SJ, and IJ types than the Caucasian sample (Levy & Ostrowski 54-55).

It seems that no matter what the race or culture, like types are drawn to like occupations. One study concluded that "...even [U.S.] managers of different races were more similar to each other than they were to the general population norms" (Malone 23).

In our society, concern about cultural biases in tests (or instruments) is frequently a topic in the media. How are these concerns related to the MBTI? Alan Weiss, president of an organizational development firm, points out that cultural biases are always present especially in forced-choice tests like the MBTI. Responses can be "highly culturally dependent". He cites examples of an immigrant who answered the items differently depending on which culture was selected as the basis for the answers. Similarly, differences may be found on a work versus home basis. Even the way the question is asked may have cultural implications. Given a forced choice scenario, people from different cultures may have very different responses to the questions: What would you think/say/do/prefer? (Weiss 3).

Simply put, we need further investigation of co-cultures in order to make full use of the MBTI in the U.S.

**What causes the cross-cultural variations that may be observed in the results of MBTI surveys?**

There are a variety of possible sources for the variations:

1 - the variations represent the true difference in preferences between cultural groups.

This is the ideal case reflecting the true environment and population. This is the goal of MBTI practitioners--but the "real world" is, of course, more complicated.

2 - the variation may be caused by a measurement of the subject's adaptive psychological type rather than the "true" type.

There can be a distinction between a person's true type and his/her adaptive type. Basically the concept is this: A true type is the one a person is born with and the adaptive type is the one (possibly different) a person uses out of necessity to adapt and survive in an environment that may favor a different type. A person may have a different "work" type than "home" type. People in traditional or regulated societies may adopt a public type that conforms to the societal expectations. Even in the individual-rights conscious U.S., there is a culturally preferred type: ESTJ. In some public situations non-ESTJs may find it advantageous to chameleon themselves to appear as ESTJs. In Japan, societal norms emphasize the value of I's versus E's.

3 - the variation may be the result of faulty statistics.

The statistical basis of the MBTI is rigorous and thorough. The results include millions of respondents. However, as experimentation proceeds in cross-cultural applications the question of statistical validity remains important. Using the methods described above, a researcher can establish the preliminary validity of the translated and/or transculturalized MBTI instrument. As the "new" instrument is placed into use, the database of results will obviously be very small. Since administrations of the MBTI often take place in "samples" that may be artificially homogeneous--such as schools, businesses, working groups, etc.--there is always the opportunity for the results to be skewed because the sample population is not representative of the entire population. The rigorous application of statistical checking techniques coupled with the accumulation of a larger data base will validate the instrument over time.

**Can cross-cultural variations be extrapolated to groups as a whole?**

It is tempting to imagine that nationalities or cultures have a type of their own--a sort of conglomerate type. It certainly seems reasonable. (But, as we shall discuss further on, this sort of thinking is at the edge of the ethical quicksand.)

"[If we can show the universality of type,]...then we can understand the differences between cultures more in terms of the

differences in the distribution of the types in different cultures" (Levy & Ostrowski 54).

Referring to the observed type differences between French, American (U.S.), francophone Canadian, and anglophone Canadian individuals--both males and females--one observer remarked: "The most commonly held stereotypes about the national character of these cultures seem to be reinforced by these findings." (Casas, Exploring the Universality of Type 244)

There is clearly much work to be done in the cross-cultural arena. MBTI professionals have been meeting for several years to address these issues. Research, conferences, and training programs will strengthen the MBTI for use in meeting the challenges and opportunities of a diverse work force as we enter the next century. Katherine D. Myers, daughter-in-law of Isabel Briggs Myers, reports that Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. "is implementing a structure to insure the same professional standards of instrumentation, validation and marketing as have been maintained domestically" (Katherine Myers 2).

#### THEORETICAL BASIS

"The aim of the MBTI is to identify, from self-report of easily recognized reactions, the basic preferences of people in regard to perception and judgement, so that the effects of each preference, singly and in combination, can be established by research and put into practical use. (Myers & McCaulley 1)

In order to explore the ethical application of the MBTI results it is important to have a better understanding of the strength of the theoretical basis for the indicator. The MBTI manual very convincingly documents the development and use of the MBTI, but there are challenges to the instrument. We should understand the challenges as part of understanding the MBTI.

Myers theory is based upon her own observations and upon Jung's theory. The essence of Jung's theory is succinctly described as follows:

"Jung believed that variations in behavior are not due to chance, whim, or personality flaw, but rather to a predictable pattern based on differences in the way people perceive information and make decisions. In Jung's judgement-free system, there is no 'good' or 'bad,' no 'right' or 'wrong', only differences to be identified, valued, and even appreciated." (Webb 34)

How does the professional community view Jung? One author says: Freudians view Jung as "loosey-goosey," psychiatrists rarely read Jung, and psychologists give him only passing mention. "Jung's theory, says British Analyst Andrew Samuels, is a 'mongrel' psychology, mixing myths and symbols of disparate cultures, yet linking all humanity through the collective unconscious." (Goode 64)

This may not sound like much of a foundation for the most popular personality-type instrument in the U.S., but there is more to the story. There are some differences between Myers' and Jung's theories.

Ana-Maria Garden, A British consultant, is particularly concerned with the distinction; noting that Myers departs from Jung in several areas and points out that these departures separate Myers, and the MBTI, from Jung:

- The use of the J-P (Judgement-Perception) dichotomy is not congruent with Jung's original work, either in form or theory.
- Jung says type is based upon habitual use of a function; while Myers says type is based upon a dichotomous preference.
- "One of Jung's basic premises was that not everyone should be considered as a type." (Garden 7)

Garden goes on to express concern with the underlying assumptions and validation of the Myers theory (as opposed to the MBTI instrument itself). "It is precisely the structure of the [Myers] type theory that needs addressing,...a number of basic building blocks of Myers' theory have barely been examined, and where they have, the evidence has not always been supportive"



(Garden 4). Some of her concerns are fundamental to Myers' type theory:

- The assumption that the MBTI scale measures degree of preference, not degree of development of the preference.
- "[T]he hypothesis of dichotomous types is precisely that--an hypothesis."
- "Even accepting the assumption of dichotomous types, the MBTI may not have operationalised the midpoint at the correct place." (Garden 4-9)

With these assaults on the theoretical foundation, how can we put any faith in the MBTI instrument? It is certainly the most popular personality instrument--taken by more than two million people per year (Lee 28); but popularity is not a measure of validity. Another author describes a four-point foundation for "practical applications of type theory":

- "The core theory itself: Jung's writings on type and Myers' development of these ideas in both her writing and the MBTI."
- "A means of empirical verification: Research with the MBTI...is the 'reality-check' against which the theory must continually be tested." "Myers...spent some forty years

developing a scientifically valid and reliable instrument for empirically testing [type theory]."

- "Intuitive inspiration: Intuitive insights..tested against established theory and research...[insure a]...dynamic balance is maintained between the enduring foundations of the theory and its continuing development."

- "Ethical practice: The ethical use of knowledge about our human nature constitutes one of the strongest foundation stones of Jung's and Myers' work." (Newman 27-28)

"Why don't some psychologists accept the MBTI as a useful tool?...Jung himself would not take the MBTI. As a clinical psychologist, he believed strongly in interview and observation methodologies. So it is with many clinical psychologists today who are not just a little skeptical about such personality indicators. Also, we have to realize that for a number of years Jung was not held in high favor in the psychological community. Freudians and others of non-Jungian persuasion are slow to sing the praises of a practical tool based on an 'alien' theory...[Since most MBTI practitioners work and publish in fields other than psychology,] it is only recently that articles on the MBTI have begun to appear in reputable journals of psychology" (Jefferies 46).

The most useful and compelling factor permitting the use of the MBTI is repeatability--or test-retest reliability. The statistics show test-retest consistency for the four letter type of between 70% and 95%--depending upon the strength of an individual's preference.

### ETHICS

"...the human condition is what psychology is all about and, therefore, the application of psychological theory has ethical consequences." (Newman 28)

In this section we will explore a number of questions concerning the MBTI and ethics:

Typewatching or typecasting? How do people who are "subjects" view psychological "tests" like the MBTI? How strong is the statistical basis for employment-related decisions? How can MBTI results be misused? Can the lack of knowledge of type result indirectly in unethical outcomes? Does pre-employment testing make sense? What about faking? How can we ethically apply MBTI results? What about the pragmatic aspects of using type in the workplace?

### **Typewatching or typecasting?**

The MBTI is a powerful tool that can truly help people learn more about themselves. Better self-understanding can help individuals in their daily lives, both personal and public. But a person's

type is a label as well as a tool. In our society we have plenty of ways to label people. Many of those labels can be, and are, used to discriminate--either intentionally or unintentionally. It is important that the MBTI types are not used as a new set of 16 discriminatory labels. The literature echoes this caution and provides examples:

- "[T]here is a danger of type terms being used to stereotype. A recent advertisement for an organizational psychologist which stated 'ESTJs and people who do not know what that means need not apply' was a misuse of type theory, because the first part of the criterion discriminates unfairly against ESTJs" (Bayne 50).
- "[C]ritics say the instrument becomes a way of pigeonholing people and even giving them type-based excuses for sub-standard performance. ('You know how we N's are; we never like to spell a word the same way twice.')" (Zemke 44).
- "The charges that Myers-Briggs stereotypes people, that it is a static, undynamic theory that traffics in labels much like astrology, have dogged the theory for years" (Moore 74-78).

How do people who are "subjects" view psychological "tests" like the MBTI?

When the MBTI is introduced in the workplace it can be a source of concern and friction. A number of authors have addressed the concerns of "subjects" of personality instruments. Here are a few quotes that seem to sum up many concerns:

- "Some scoff at all this 'type talk,' dismissing it as Jungian astrology, and many resist the idea of being 'type-cast.'...[There is] anxiety that type information might be used by the administration to select staff for promotion or transfer" (Webb 36).

- "If a respondent thinks competence or ability is being measured, the measure is likely to be more threatening and perhaps, therefore, less useful" (Bayne 49).

- "William Whyte articulated the concerns of many when he cited these tests as a threat to individuality and the precursor to grimly homogenized corporate cultures" (Lasden 81).

How strong is the statistical basis for employment-related decisions?

This is a worrisome topic because the MBTI may be used to exclude, or give advantage, based upon type. Professional opinions vary. Tim Beardsley points out in an article in Scientific American "...most of the supposed correlations between scores and job performance were likely to be the result of pure chance" (156).. He quotes Rodney L. Lowman, a psychologist at Duke University Medical Center and author of a book about testing: "There is far more practice than there is research literature to support the proactive use of these tests...mistakes are being made by screening services that may be overly aggressive in weeding people out...specific job relevancy has yet to be demonstrated" (Beardsley 154). Beardsley generally concludes that even rigorously applied tests will not yield a worthwhile improvement over pure chance.

Other authors support this view stating: "The published research on the validity of personality tests for personnel decision making is much thinner than many personnel professionals may imagine. Thinner in two senses: there is not much of it, and what there is gives scant grounds for confidence in the method" (Fletcher, Blinkhorn, Johnson 38). Researchers using computer simulation techniques have tested the validity of published test results. "Our conclusion was that there were no grounds for supposing that personality tests predict performance at work to

any useful extent, except in a minority of rather extreme kinds of work (for instance, those involving severe social isolation)" (Fletcher, Blinkhorn, and Johnson 38). Pointing out that even the best correlations are in the range of 0.01 to 0.13, they add: "Only if you can afford to reject nine out of 10 applicants will such relationships yield much benefit." Other commenters on this subject express careful opinions that refute some of these points but add cautions that the tests should be interpreted by experienced professionals and that they should be carefully applied as an aid to interviewing, subject self-awareness, or team building. (Fletcher, Blinkhorn, and Johnson 40-42)

It is evident that there is not a sufficient statistical basis for the use of personality tests, including the MBTI, to make employment decisions.

#### **How can MBTI results be misused?**

The MBTI is useful in a number of legitimate areas such as self-awareness, counselling, curriculum design, and team building to improve organizational performance. Unfortunately, some authors go much farther. They actually propose segregating selected types for special treatment--albeit for the benefit of the organization.

In an article describing a way to meet business challenges with organizational flexibility and less structure, one author states: "Research indicates that executives who test out highly intuitive on instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) have the kind of innovative problem solving talent organizations are searching for". He goes on to say: "One of the most effective steps that organizations can take to help increase their productivity is to systematically implement an overall program designed to locate the existing intuitive talent they have, identify the type of intuitive talent they have, and then follow management practices designed to use and develop this talent for effective decision making" (Agor 68). He identifies the following benefits and ideas:

- "...the organization will have a better idea of whom to assign to activities such as brainstorming sessions."
- "...the organization should establish a network of talent for future use."
- "...testing will indicate to intuitive executives that the organization values their skills and talents, thereby reducing turnover rates." (Agor 69)

This is all very logical and perhaps seemingly benign. But clearly a line is crossed with the recommendation of "establishing a formal 'intuition club'...to reestablish a more



integrated balance to your more traditional management techniques" (Agor 70). It is clear that, even with the most careful application, this use of type is un-ethical.

The identification, segregation, and special treatment for iNtuitives--or any other type--is fundamentally unsound and inappropriate for other reasons as well. The MBTI identifies only a person's preferences. It does not indicate anything else about the person or their capabilities, knowledge, experience, or potential for success. Most importantly, it does not even tell whether the subject has developed the practical use of his/her own preferences! Therefore, to base any corporate program solely, or predominantly, on type is illogical as well as unethical.

Another observer writes: "In one banking client, I found the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) being used as an all purpose panacea, with managers making decisions based entirely on the individuals' MBTI scores and nothing else!" (Weiss 3)

Typewatching professionals can be caught up in type-based bias, too. One author notes a subtle and systematic bias can creep into discussions, literature, and materials of the "experts." One example cited is the feeling amongst type experts (who tend to be predominantly N's themselves) that N's are more creative (i.e. better) than S's. He also explains this behavior by noting: The secret belief, that one's own type is the best, is a

"stage" that one must transcend in order to appreciate type difference in others (Hammer 14-16).

Even Otto Kroeger admits, in his book Type Talk at Work, to trying to round out his predominantly NFP organization by hiring an ESTJ. (It didn't work out; the employee was let go.) "Indeed we didn't practice what we now preach: We tried to hire principally on the basis of type. We've since learned from our mistake" (Kroeger 123).

There are ways to misuse the MBTI indirectly for discriminating. Imagine a group of people that happens to have a telltale type. If that group is also the target of discrimination, it would be easy to misuse the MBTI by excluding the type--and thus the target group--from hiring or other opportunities.

A simple example would be to only include people who have a T preference. In the U.S., about two-thirds of the T's are male and only one-third female (Kroeger and Thuesen 31). Thus, mathematically this would double the chance of hiring a male and halve the chances for a female even if in all other respects the selection process could be made truly blind to the sex of the applicants. Similar opportunities for discrimination could appear if cultural groups display telltale types.

**Can the lack of knowledge of type result indirectly in unethical outcomes?**

Just as over-reliance on the MBTI in the hiring process is unethical, lack of knowledge of type may be harmful as well. People tend to get along well and associate with others who are like themselves. This can carry over to the workplace and hiring or promotion decisions. It is easy to imagine that managers might tend to hire people who are like themselves. As a result, a company--or an organization--could take on a "type" of its own, reinforced naturally but unintentionally through a history of hiring decisions. Eventually the company president may be replaced by someone who has come up within the company, a "clone" of the original. So, an awareness of type may help guard against cloning.

**Does pre-employment testing make sense?**

Related to the ethics issue is the consideration of whether pre-employment personality testing makes good business sense. Tighter business competition means more emphasis on good hiring decisions. Certainly tests that directly measure job related skills and abilities would be a useful hiring tool. But are personality tests the right tool? Some authors think not, pointing out that: "Although employers are increasingly using personality tests in hiring decisions, tests are generally poor predictors of an applicant's job performance" because:

- "Personality is extremely difficult to measure."
- Other factors affect productivity more than personality: training and experience, functional layout of the workplace, and individual employee motivation.
- "There's rarely only one way to do a job."
- Finally, there can be legal problems if some applicants are unfairly excluded. (Taylor & Zimmerer 60-62)

"For personality tests to help...the following must be true:

- 1) Personality must be directly related to job performance;
- 2) certain jobs must require certain personalities; and
- 3) personality tests used for hiring decisions must accurately measure personality traits. None of these three statements is correct. Adding these devices to the selection process is more likely to increase costs than to decrease them." (Taylor & Zimmerer 64)

Since the personality testing program itself has costs as well, all of this adds up to demonstrate that the exclusive use of personality tests for hiring decisions costs more than it's worth.

### What about faking?

While we're thinking about ethics, let's look at the other side of the coin. What about the subjects? It may be in their best interest to "beat the system" on the MBTI instrument. Of course, they may have to assume what "the system" is in order to make the attempt.

One study evaluated the fakeability of the MBTI. The three sets of subjects were asked to answer the instrument and to: fake good, be honest, or fake bad (i.e. present yourself in best/worst possible light). The author noted that the responses indicated that:

- The fake good profile is ESTJ; bad ISTP.
- E is seen as good; I bad; J good; P bad.
- High scores on S and T are seen as both good and bad.
- Low scores on J and F are seen as both good and bad.
- The honest (control) group was ENFP. (Furnham 716)

The author concludes that "...faking is not easy and there is not clear agreement as to what constitutes a good or bad response" (Furnham 716). "The results of this study showed three of the most widely used personality questionnaires in occupational psychology [including the MBTI] appear highly susceptible to deliberate faking" (Furnham 714).

Now let's consider the ethics of the subjects themselves. Here are two interesting points of view:

"Thus it is possible that if people fake on application questionnaires they are likely to be unreliable employees either because they are mentally unstable or else prone to ingratiation and dissimulation to achieve some end. On the other hand it should be pointed out that subjects who are able to fake good in psychiatric settings are typically better adjusted. It is possible that some mild forms of 'faking good' are highly appropriate for job applicants in that the total absence of efforts at distortion may have psychological correlates. This question, however, awaits further empirical investigation." (Furnham 715)

"'If tests are being legitimately applied to assist in the career-planning process, then it's in your interest to answer the tester's questions as honestly as you can,' Dudley says. 'But if tests are being used to inflict insights upon you, then it's in your best interest to tell the tester exactly what it is he wants to hear.'" (Lasden 86)

The reader may decide to choose either of the above points of view; but we should remember that the subjects are making their choices, too.

## **How can we ethically apply MBTI results?**

There are several keys to ethically applying MBTI results. The first is confirmation. The statistics on a psychological instrument can have a wide range and still be considered "acceptable" (because they can be proven statistically to be better than random). Therefore, in using the MBTI, the confirmation of "tested" type by the subject is critical. The subject, in every instance, must be able to accept or reject the type that the MBTI instrument provides. This simple step is the single most important safeguard of the subject's interest.

Second, continue the controls over the administration of the instrument. CPP (Consulting Psychological Press) requires administrators of the MBTI to be certified. These trained personnel can exert their influence to help see that the MBTI is used for the purpose Isabel Briggs Myers intended--to make better use of our "gifts differing" (Myers).

Third, use the MBTI in applications where it has shown its statistical strength--repeatability. It's a great tool for self-awareness; stay away from using it for employment decisions.

Fourth, follow this advice: "MBTI practitioners must have a foundation in some professional practice...then, and only then, is the MBTI a valuable and appropriate tool. Without this broader foundation, the MBTI will be used indiscriminately: 'if

- all you've got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.' There are times when using the MBTI is not the best intervention and can even be destructive" (Provost 7).

Lastly, and most importantly, we should always remember the "guinea pigs" are human beings. The damage from un-ethical practice affects the lives of real people.

**What about the pragmatic aspects of using type in the workplace?**

Listen to the experts:

- "The APT (Association for Psychological Type) Statement of Ethical Principles makes it clear that psychological type ought not be used to advantage or disadvantage anyone" (Jefferies 63).

- "Typewatching literature continues to affirm that any of the sixteen types has the potential to be successful at any job" (Kroeger 119).

- "A psychological instrument such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was never intended to be used as the only criterion of employment. Ethically and even legally, using type as the basis of a hiring or firing decision would be inappropriate....Finally, using type to fire--or not hire or promote--someone could be seen as a form of discrimination.



There is a growing body of laws that speaks loudly and clearly to that issue" (Kroeger 118-119).

- "Any organization that selects leaders even partially on the basis of personality traits is risking serious EEO difficulties. Not only is there the danger of being accused of illegal discrimination, but there is also the real possibility of being found guilty" (Taylor & Zimmerer 63).

- "The bottom line in personnel is this: You are never hiring a **type** for a job. You're hiring a **person**" (Kroeger 119).

#### CONCLUSION

**"No paper and pen indicator, no matter how well conceived and normed, can sum up human personality." (Jefferies 23)**

The most important "lesson learned" about the MBTI is that it is empirical! It is valid, repeatable, useful, interesting; we know it works; but we really don't know exactly why. Nor is the theory fully developed and justified. Therefore, it must be used judiciously.

In general, when using the MBTI, I would recommend following a narrow ethical road:

- Use the MBTI only where the subject is voluntarily involved and personally verifies his/her type.
- It is important to remember that the "guinea pigs" are human beings. Depending on the circumstances, the subjects may easily feel threatened by the "test". In some instances, they may bring psychological problems to the arena that could be exacerbated by the process of being "typed."
- An individual--or group--should never be segregated "in" or "out" using type. And type should never be used for hiring or promotion decisions.

We have seen there are cross-cultural differences in MBTI results and that more research is required in this area. Hopefully the results of that research will enable the further use of type to improve human understanding.

**"There are no good or bad types in typewatching; there are only differences." (Kroeger 7)**

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